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AUTHOR Chamberlain, Kathleen
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ABSTRACT

Women faculty members must unite with women students to gain control over their work--education-- and make that education meaningful to women. Since the struggles of the two groups for liberation are not separate, the needs of women students at community colleges should be important to faculty. It is maintained that at Manhattan Community College students' needs are not being met as far as physical environment, curriculum, vocational training, or faculty and administration attitudes are concerned. About 2/3 of the women students are black and Puerto Rican; about 1/3 are white working class. Women students as a group are less motivated than men, have lower aspirations, and are tracked into limited female service occupations. One of the results of a long period of student militance at MCC was a demand for women's studies courses. In designing the course Images of Women in Literature, it was discovered that little writing about third world women, or working class women in general, exists. Consequently, the course was designed both to give women the knowledge about themselves that will help to liberate them and to motivate them to write about themselves. The women in the course have produced poems, plays, autobiographies, films, children's stories, and research papers. The increased consciousness led to the formation in 1971 of The Women's Union to improve education and working conditions for all women--teachers, students and secretaries--at the school. (KM)

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WOMEN STUDENTS AT MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Kathleen Chamberlain

Manhattan Community College

Coming to hear a talk on "Women in Two Year Colleges," an MLA audience might expect the emphasis to be on the status of women professors. I want to focus instead primarily on women students, for two reasons. First of all, as members of the MLA much of our concern for the unequal position of women in our society has been concentrated on advancing the rank and salary and working conditions of the woman professor. Such concerns are very important, and it is right that we have been addressing ourselves to the great injustices that women teachers have suffered in the university and it is correct that we are seeking solutions to these injustices. But this alone would be an inadequate response to the situation of women in the university, particularly those in community colleges. Secondly, as was made clear yesterday in the forum on "The Economics of Higher Education," teachers--and I think especially women teachers--cannot in these times better our working conditions by ourselves. We must unite with our women students and work with our students if we are to regain--or obtain--control over our work, the work of education, and make that education meaningful to women.

At Manhattan Community College several women on the faculty active in the women's movement have made substantial contributions to it through articles, work in professional associations, and statistical studies showing discrimination against women teachers in the university. But it was the women students who took the initiative at the college for women's studies courses, although they were soon joined by faculty women. It was women students who fought for and established a child care center. It was the students who first opened our eyes to what women could do at the college. We are working together now, and the experience is mutually beneficial. Our struggles for equality and liberation are not separate struggles. For all of these reasons, I would like to emphasize the needs of women students in community colleges.

Manhattan Community College is part of the City University of New York. Over 60% of the student body is third world. The college is located in Midtown Manhattan surrounded by Rockefeller Center, Radio City Music Hall, and the Allied Chemical Building. The "community" part of this community college is not--obviously--the communities and neighborhoods from which the students come--El Barrio, Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Lower East Side--the communities to which many of the students hope to return to work with their people. Instead it is the New York City business community. This is made clear by the official Manhattan Community College Student Handbook. Our wilfully blind administration who

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put out the handbook has not yet offered even lip service to the idea that "the two year college is dedicated to the needs of the whole community." The administration admonishes the students:

> Keep in mind that you now attend what is, in a very real sense, a "community college." This community is situated in the heart of New York City--a great business, industrial, entertainment, and tourist area. By maintaining the proper relationship with this community and by helping to build its excellent reputation, you will best serve your own interests as well as those of your fellow students, the alumni who graduated before you, and the students who will come after you. It is to the advantage of all to have neighbors and passers-by look with pride and respect upon all Manhattan Community College students.

The dream of the founders, back in 1964, was to serve the business community. Our President speaks to new faculty at welcoming teas about his vision of the "marriage of education and industry."[1]

It is this concept of a community college which our students have been fighting against--and the reason they raised a banner in the spring of 1970, during a demonstration, proclaiming the kind of school they were fighting for: "A University to Serve the People." And it is the reason that spring they renamed the school "People's Community College."

At a time when City University's much discussed "open admissions" program is supposedly underway, the Manhattan Community College does not prepare its students to "make it" in American society. And it certainly does not provide them with an understanding of the roots of social problems nor with full-fledged departments in their own histories and cultures. Much of what our students are taught is irrelevant or obsolete. Necessary services have been inadequate or nonexistent. The effect of the school on some students is actually damaging and leaves them worse off than before--if they get hooked on heroin; or end up in a course which trains them for something which computers handle better these days; or wind up with a two-year degree in a field in which there are no jobs.

I want to give a brief catalogue of horrors to illustrate this more concretely. Most students at Manhattan Community College who follow the recommended schedule of courses can't possibly graduate in two years. Drugs are pushed in the student lounges; Manhattan Community is considered a pushers' paradise in the area. The buildings are spread out from 48th Street to 70th Street with no busses or money provided for transportation to and from classes. There is no cafeteria at our school and food prices in the restaurants in the area are astronomical. There is no temperature control in the classrooms which are either suffocatingly hot or freezing. Classrooms are too small. Classes are overcrowded (I had 50 students in one of my three freshman composition

courses this fall). Remedial and tutorial programs, where they exist, are inadequate and understaffed. The buildings face noisy streets--every day that my classes meet we have to shout at each other over the sounds of garbage trucks, traffic, and drilling. Most of the students must work in order to attend school at all, but work-study jobs at the college have been few and far between, and last semester the college ran out of work-study funds entirely.

Our nursing program is infamous for being the worst in the state; out of some two hundred students in the program a year ago only eleven had been given sufficient training to pass the state nursing examinations. The business programs have trained students for obsolete jobs. The Liberal Arts division still uses text books that insult Black and Puerto Rican students. The faculty still harbors teachers such as the one who told his students this fall that Harlem is a stultifying environment and if they stay there they will remain as stupid as they are now; that there is no hope for them unless they escape through education, which means learning "real culture," specifically British literature, and changing their accents.

Our students' needs clearly are not being met. Nevertheless City University and Manhattan Community College have money to spend on such things as the President's $50,000 home and his $10,000 inauguration. Legislative Conference (one of the teachers' bargaining agents) estimates that City University has spent $65,000 on litigation against the unions since last spring. This figure does not include the high cost of arbitration which the City University shares with the unions.

Most of the students, as I mentioned before, are third world, and most of these Puerto Rican and Black. A majority of the rest are white students from working-class backgrounds. A great number of them live in what the City of New York designates as "poverty areas" in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx.

I would like to discuss the women students more specifically. My information comes from a study called "Profile of Borough of Manhattan Community College's 1st Open Admissions Entry Class: Fall, 1970" and from a preliminary study for Fall, 1971, both by the college statistician Irving Cohen. About two thirds of the women are Black and Puerto Rican; about one third are white working class. Many women students are older (though accurate figures are not yet available on this). Many of them have children. Most have to work in order to go to college. They and their mothers are or have been housewives, factory workers, office workers and domestics. Thirty-three percent of them have mothers who went to school to the sixth or eighth grade and then dropped out for good. Only eight or nine percent have mothers who had any college at all. For one fourth of the women, English is not spoken very often in their homes.

The women students of Fall, 1970 entered Manhattan Community College with higher high school averages than the men (75.1 for the women, 70.5 for the men) and slightly higher verbal SAT scores. By the end of one semester the men had higher grade point averages than the women. When they entered as freshmen 64.5 percent of the men said they planned further education after graduating from the community college. In comparison, 42.5 percent of the women planned to continue their education. One problem we face, then, in teaching our women students is that the women--who comprise about 57 percent of the student body--are less motivated than the men. All of the students suffer from a poor, if not damaging, education. But the women students, because of their lack of motivation and lower aspirations, and because they are tracked into limited female service occupations are even worse off, in most cases, then the men. Many women students--and teachers--are tracked into nursing and secretarial science, what we call the female ghetto departments. Women have frequently told me that their high school guidance counsellors had advised them to become legal secretaries when they wanted to become lawyers, nurses when they wanted to become doctors.

(And this socialization process--which teaches women to think small-starts very early. A friend who teaches fourth graders at a New York City public school--children who will go to community colleges someday if they get to college at all--told me that when she asked the girls in her class what they wanted to be when they grew up, they answered not nurses, but nurses aides, not secretaries, but typists.)

It was conditions such as those I have described that gave rise to a long period of student militance. For two and a half years, from 1968 to the spring of 1971, Manhattan Community College was the scene of building takeovers, mass rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes, led by students demanding control over their education, and an education that would meet their needs rather than the needs of the New York City business community. They demanded work-study jobs, a child care center, more remedial services, a cafeteria for students and workers at the college, lower registration fees, an improved nursing program, the removal of drug pushers, and Black and Puerto Rican studies departments.

Out of this general struggle came a demand in the fall of 1970 from women students for women's studies courses. This was one of several battles that was won (although we do not yet have an official "program" of women's studies). When my colleague Naomi Woronov and I started to design our course, "Images of Women in Literature," one of the first two women's studies courses offered (the other is "Psychology of Women"), uppermost in our minds was a desire to provide a course which would best serve the needs of the women students at the college, since it was they who had begun the fight for better education for women at the college.

Our first objective was to find books, pamphlets and films that would reflect their images--the images of the women in our courses-in literature. And materials that would give them, and us, positive images of women to identify with. This was not easy. There are very few books by or about Black, Puerto Rican, Asian-American, and white, working-class women. Some books which have been written are out of print. Others are put out by small publishing companies and are difficult to get hold of. But our main discovery, which seems obvious to us now, was that most of these books just haven't been written yet.

But we persevered in our search, believing that people who have been oppressed by a racist, sexist, and class-biased culture--the dominant culture in our country--cannot become liberated, cannot gain power in this society for themselves and others like them by being forced to copy, because it is the only choice offered, the dominant culture that is not theirs and in fact works against them. Black women who work, for example, cannot be liberated by imitating a society which says that a woman's place is in the home. Blacks, Latins--working class people generally--who are taught that their grammar is substandard and their speech is unintelligible will not find the voices to make their needs known to each other and to the rest of society. People who have been denied their history and literature cannot create their own future. The Black poet Sonia Sanchez, who teaches English at Manhattan Community College, said in an interview that the English and history departments have been the most racist departments in colleges because they have omitted the history and literature of Black people. She pointed out that the white ruling class in America "knows its history and understands it fully. And they learn it in the schools. We don't learn anything about ourselves so therefore we were like Topsy, we just grew. So now we study our history to know the kinds of people we've been, the kinds of people we can be...A people who don't know their history can never be anything."

So we looked for materials which would tell women about themselves, provide information about their traditions, their oppression, their strength, materials that would tell about their literary and historical heroines--Rosa, Reena, Emma, Harriet, Sojourner, Goldflower, Esperanza, to name just a few that many of us only recently found out about. This knowledge is power--the power that will help to liberate all women.

And we had another objective: we hoped that reading about themselves would motivate the women to write about themselves--to tell their stories that have never been told, to break some of those silences in literature. Josephine Carson, in her book Silent Voices: The Southern Negro Woman Today, quotes the poet Rimbaud as he imagines what will happen when women find their voices:

> "When the infinite servitude of women
> shall have ended, when she will be able
> to live by and for herself, then man--
> hitherto abominable--having given her
> her freedom, she too will be a poet.
> Woman will discover the unknown. Will
> her world be different from ours? She
> will discover strange unfathomable
> things, repulsive, delicious. We shall
> take them, we shall understand them."

Those women who have been left out of history and literature not only because they are women but also because they are Black or Puerto Rican, Asian-American, Chicano, Native American, white working class--those women who have been in what Frances Beale calls double jeopardy have been silenced most completely. It is these women especially who have much to say that has never been said. And these are the women who are in community colleges now, usually the first women in their families to go to college, or even high school.

Tillie Olsen, author of the working-class stories in the collection called Tell Me A Riddle[2], told me to tell the students in my class "why they must not think of themselves as students but as possible voices for the as yet unvoiced, left out, unrecorded." We put Tillie's statement on the cover of our syllabus, and a Dominican student in the women's course responded to it in her first paper:

> I have been left out and unvoiced in the past,
> not only as a woman but as an individual from
> a Latin culture in America. But those days of
> being left out are gone, never to return. I
> know what I want in the future: to be treated
> as an equal economically, socially, and politically
> and to help those still oppressed to "see the truth."

Last week when the twelve Puerto Rican women in the course were criticizing it for the lack of reading material on Puerto Rican women and we were discussing how little was available, one woman suddenly addressed the rest with much emotion in her voice: "I have a message for my Puerto Rican sisters: Write! Write all you can."

And the women in "Images of Women in Literature" have been writing and creating: poems, plays, autobiographies, films, and children's stories--and research papers on Black women and women's liberation; the status of Puerto Rican women in Puerto Rico; the position of women in the People's Republic of China. A woman fortunate enough to have someone to help her with her children spent hundreds of hours in the New York City Public Library reading every biography of a woman written for children that she could find. She wrote an article on this subject and attached an excellent sixty page annotated bibliography. A Puerto

Rican woman taped a group of Puerto Rican women discussing machismo for a newspaper article. Another woman translated into English poems by Lola Rodriguez de Tío, a Puerto Rican revolutionary, and poems by Julia de Burgos.

The increased consciousness of ourselves as women and the more concrete understanding of our oppression which grew out of the struggles for women's studies and the child care center and out of the women's courses themselves created a desire for--as one student put it--"more places to go." So we formed what we call The Women's Union this fall at Manhattan Community College, to begin to improve education and working conditions for all women at the school. This is one way that a united struggle of all community college women can be carried out. The women's union includes secretaries also--those too often invisible women who are a vital part of any college. Teachers, students, and secretaries together--about two hundred women have endorsed the union so far--are planning to work on (to mention just a few things) more women's studies courses, and the right of secretaries to take these and other courses; and to fight discrimination against women teachers in hiring and promotion. Our project for the spring is to start a Health Information Center to inform students about drugs, venereal disease, the genocidal forced sterilization third world people have experienced in New York City, and about birth control and abortion.

We are optimistic about the future of women in community colleges if we can all--secretaries, students, and teachers--join together and struggle together to gain control over our education and our place of work. But we know this is just the beginning of a very long march.

1 The muckraking material used in this paper was unearthed by the editorial collective of The Tiger Paper (a faculty underground newspaper)--Ruth Misheloff, Naomi Woronov, Kathy Chamberlain, Jim Perlstein, Bill Friedheim, Mike Rosenbaum--and by Manhattan Community College's student government, the Third World Coalition.

2 Tillie Olsen's Tell Me A Riddle is available again, in a paperback edition put out by Dell Publishing Co. in 1971.